The French Revolution and Romanticism

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1 Roots of the Revolution

he Spread of Ideas In the late 1700s, Paris was buzzing with new idea People came together to talk about these ideas at social gatherings know as salons. These salons usually took place in the fashionable mansio of wealthy aristocrats.

They attracted writers, poets, musicians, important government officials, liberal-minded aristocrats, and many members of the rapidly growing middle class.

These people talked about the Enlightenment ideas that were sweeping across Europe: ideas about natural rights, the rights of man, religious tolerance, freedom of speech and of the press, and political freedom to choose their own leaders.

If you had been a guest at one of these salons, you might have heard about the ideas of John Locke, the English philosopher who argued that all people have certain natural rights and that the people of a nation have the right to get rid of any government that takes away these rights. Or you might have heard people refer to one of the French *philosophes* (FEE luh zohfs), the thinkers of the Enlightenment, who believed in justice, tolerance, and freedom. The *philosophes* wanted to limit the power of the **absolute monarch** and give the people a voice in government. The most famous *philosophes* were Voltaire (vohl TAIR), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (rooh SOH), and Montesquieu (MON tuh skyooh).

Voltaire was the wittiest and most popular of the *philosophes*. He was a great advocate of religious freedom, and he used humor and satire to make his points. He made the French people laugh at his jokes and insults toward the institution he most hated, the Catholic Church. He claimed that the Church deliberately kept people in ignorance ar superstition and refused to tolerate any disagree ments. "Crush the infamous thing!" was the famous slogan that he used against the Church.

vocabulary
absolute monarch
a monarch whose power is not limited by a representative assembly

Rousseau was even more radical than Voltair He complained that people are born free but usually end up enslaved. He summarized the political state of the world in a famous line: "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains. Rousseau wanted to see those chains broken anc destroyed. He also angered the French rulers by insisting that kings should rule by the will of th people, not by the will of God.

Montesquieu delivered a severe critique of French government and society in his *Persian Letters*. He also praised the English for establishin and preserving a balance of power between Parli ment and the king. He felt that such balanced government was better than the absolute monarch of the Bourbon (BOOR buhn) kings who ruled France. Bourbon was the family name of the lin of kings who had ruled France for 200 years.

Talk of Change

In the salons of Paris, people could discuss the ideas of these thinkers openly and freely. Bu elsewhere, they had to be more careful. They we not free to openly criticize the state in public.

Writings were censored as well as speech. Works of Voltaire and the other *philosophes* had to be circulated in manuscript form or sent to other countries to be printed as books and then smuggled back into France.

Enlightenment ideas spread in the sparkling, elegant atmosphere of the salons, where philosophes *and aristocrats freely discussed ideas.*

Despite these laws, Enlightenment ideas continued to spread in France. Many well-educated members of the middle and upper classes found these ideas appealing. They liked the idea of having a voice in government, something they had never had under the rule of the Bourbon kings. Even some members of the aristocracy were growing tired of the king's absolutist ideas and hoped for change. Some of the officials who were supposed to censor books actually helped banned authors circulate their writings secretly.

By the late 1780s, the ideas of the Enlightenment had been simmering in the minds of French people for decades. Some *philosophes*, including Voltaire, believed that the best road to change was to convince the king to make reforms. Radical thinkers thought that more drastic steps were needed. They didn't want to rely on the king's good will to give them the freedoms they deserved. They wanted to limit the king's power. After all, the English had done it. The French could do it, too.

The Influence of English Rights

Many French thinkers had visited England and been impressed with English freedom. When Voltaire visited in 1726, the English way of government was firmly established. Parliament had passed the Bill of Rights that forced the king to share power with it and limited the government's right to treat people arbitrarily. But it had taken a bloody civil war in the 1640s and the Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689 to establish England's limited monarchy.

High officials of the French government worried. In 1649 the English had executed their king, Charles I. Imagine—ordinary people just across the English Channel executing a monarch who ruled by the divine right of kings.

Indeed, English ideas traveled easily to France. Many Frenchmen, including Voltaire and Montesquieu, believed that the English system was better than their own.

Some French intellectuals were beginning to ask, "Why not France? Why not have a limited monarchy like the English? Why must we continue to suffer the injustices of a tyrannical Church and state?"

Enlightenment and America

Meanwhile, the light of these new ideas had reached across the ocean to America. Men who would soon risk their lives and fortunes in a revolution against Great Britain were enthusiastically absorbing Enlightenment ideas. Americans such as Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson were already well acquainted with the rights that the English had won in the Glorious Revolution, and they expected those rights for the American colonists.

These Enlightenment ideas gave the American revolutionaries the ammunition they needed to fight for their independence and for a new kind of government, one that would go far beyond what many French intellectuals of the time could imagine. Soon the French, who had sent their ideas, would send more important help to the American revolutionaries.

"Let Me Volunteer"

The aristocrat Marquis de Lafayette (mahr KEY duh lah fee ET) believed in the ideals of the Enlightenment, and he wanted to help America's struggle for freedom. Eager to win military fame and glory, he bought his own ship and volunteered to fight with the colonists.

Lafayette led troops in battle against the British and risked his life to fight for his ideals. He showed that he was truly committed to the cause of liberty. Lafayette became a hero of the American Revolution as well as a hero to his own people in France. He was the first Frenchman to join the American fight, but many others followed him.

France to the Rescue

The French king, Louis XVI, was an absol monarch. You will soon read about him. He h no sympathy for the ideals of the American Revolution. But for centuries France and Grea Britain had been enemies. The French and Indian War had cost the French enormous sun of money and had led to the loss of almost all of France's territory in North America. Nothin could make King Louis happier than to see the British humiliated by the upstart American rev lutionaries, even if he didn't share their beliefs.

In February 1778, France and the United States signed the Treaty of Alliance agreeing to help each other fight Great Britain. France sent money, equipment, 12,000 soldiers, 32,000 sailors, and a large naval fleet.

The Marquis de Lafayette played an important role in the American and the French revolutions.

Many of the Frenchmen who had fought side by side with the Americans—especially Lafayette—admired the courage of the Americans. They had seen firsthand how a handful of determined revolutionaries who believed in the ideals of the Enlightenment could defy a mighty empire. Among the liberal intellectuals in France, the success of the United States made the desire for liberty burn more brightly.

The American Revolution also contributed in an unexpected way to the French desire for reform. It was costly. The French treasury was still feeling the effects of the very expensive French and Indian War. Helping the Americans win their independence had emptied the treasury even further. And that meant higher taxes on the people. The empty treasury and the heavy taxes needed to refill it contributed to the beginnings of revolution in France.